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SUBJECT: CODEL NELSON: MEETINGS WITH FM PEREZ AND NA VICE
PRESIDENT GUTIERREZ

Classified By: POLITICAL COUNSELOR ABELARDO A. ARIAS FOR REASONS 1.4 (d
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Summary

11. (C) In separate meetings, Senator Bill Nelson (D-FL) pressed Venezuelan Foreign Minister Jesus Perez and National Assembly Vice President Ricardo Gutierrez on the referendum, relations with Cuba, GOV support to the FARC, passport fraud, and agreement for Ambassador-designate Brownfield. Gutierrez said close ties with Cuba would not result in a second Cuba in Venezuela; he demurred on alleged evidence of USG support for the April 2002 coup attempt, saying that President Chavez had more information. FonMin Perez denied GOV supported the FARC; expressed concern over USG statements that &reverberated8 within Venezuela; said the GOV approved of the OAS and Carter Center role in the referendum process; and said he would press Chavez on agreement. End Summary.

Foreign Minister Perez

12. (C) ForMin Perez received Senator Nelson on Saturday, April 17. Also present were the Ambassador, staffer Dan Shapiro, the ForMin,s aide, DCM, and conoff. Perez began with the familiar government line on the importance of bilateral relations and the need to get through the current bilateral differences. Nelson told Perez up front that he perceived that relations were bad. He stressed that Senator Kerry,s earlier statement (posted on his webpage) that criticized the GOV and supported the referendum process genuinely reflected Kerry,s views; he also stressed that Kerry,s statement was not an effort to court the Cuban-American vote, which no matter what Kerry said would vote overwhelmingly for President Bush. Nelson said was going to meet with presidential candidate Sen. Kerry during the following three days, and asked Perez what he should tell the Senator about Venezuela.

13. (C) Perez said the GOV had the will to improve relations with the USG. Unfortunately, relations were badly damaged after the April 2002 coup. The GOV not only supported the role of the OAS and the Carter Center, but had invited them in the first place. Unfortunately, Perez said, the Venezuelan opposition did not want to abide by the rules, nor did it accept that there were autonomous institutions that disagreed with the opposition (a reference to the CNE (electoral council), which is controlled by Chavistas). The opposition sought to politicize the work of foreign observers. Public statements by the USG reverberated throughout the country, and Perez &implored8 the US to think carefully about the effects of such statements on democracy in Venezuela. Sen. Nelson said that good relations indicated that the GOV should provide agreement to Ambassador-designate Brownfield; Perez said the international cabinet of the GOV had so recommended to President Chavez, and that he was hopeful that agreement would be approved.

14. (C) Sen. Nelson turned the conversation to Venezuelan support for the FARC; he told Perez that he believed that the GOV was adding the Colombian guerrillas. Perez disagreed; Sen. Nelson said that he had seen intelligence to support his conclusion. Perez did not respond.

15. (C) Turning to document fraud, Sen. Nelson underscored the USG concern that Venezuelan passports were easily bought, and thus could be openly used by criminals and terrorists seeking to carry out attacks in the US and Europe. Perez said the subject is of great concern to the GOV, which had inherited a bad situation. The GOV is developing methods to better control passports and identity cards. (Note: three days later, the Disip police announced arrests of several passport procurers.) Perez said the GOV is waiting to see what decision the Andean Community will make regarding a common passport for 2005.

16. (C) During his April 16 call on Gutierrez, Sen. Nelson emphasized U.S. concern for democracy and worries about the very close relationship between Venezuela and Cuba. Nelson was particularly concerned by the series of false statements by GOV officials that accused the USG of having carried out the April 2002 coup - this was totally false. Gutierrez demurred, saying that President Chavez must have classified information that substantiated GOV claims. Gutierrez complained that the USG had also financed groups that had participated in the 2002-03 strike, and suggested that USG covert operations were taking place in Venezuela. Nelson said this was not the case. Turning to Cuba, Sen. Nelson stressed our concern about Chavez, close friendship with a dictator. Gutierrez said that Castro has wide support in Latin America because of his successful social policies and because of his anti-US stance. He defended the presence and the work of the Cuban doctors in Venezuela, and said there was no way these doctors would indoctrinate Venezuelans with Communist ideas. Venezuela was a democracy, and there was no risk that a castroite communism would take over.

Comment

17. (C) The GOV was caught flat footed by Senator Nelson,s interview with the Miami Herald on April 17. Apparently ForMin Perez had told Chavez that the meeting went well, then had to explain the criticism of the government in the interview. Former Foreign Minister Chaderton told the Ambassador on April 22 that Ambassador to Washington Alvarez had been overconfident about the Nelson visit. The GOV consistently mistakes cordiality with agreement, then denounces critics as having double-crossed GOV hospitality. As a TV channel owner told the Ambassador on April 23, giving the interview to a U.S. paper rather than a Venezue3lan medium was a very smart decision. Otherwise the GOV would have dismissed Senator Nelson,s comments as part of a media conspiracy.
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